

*Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism.* By Michael J. Buckley, S.J. Yale University Press, 2004. 173 pages. \$40.00.

How in the world did we end up *here*? At one time, the Christian faith was the foundation on which rested the tradition of Western Europe; its tenets and practices shaped the entire culture. While neither uniform nor hegemonic (it was the Muslim community in Spain that famously preserved the writings of Aristotle), it was the Christian worldview that framed the lives of millions of people for over a thousand years. How things have changed! Demographic research indicates that somewhere between 43% and 54% of French citizens don't believe in God; Britain, with an established Church, is between 31% and 44% atheistic; and in Italy, of all places, the numbers are between 6% and 15%.

How in the world did we end up *here*? This is the question that Buckley answers in *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism*. He locates the beginning of atheism as we know it in the early modern period, a latent toxin hidden in the scientific presuppositions enthusiastically embraced by theologians beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ideas that would reveal their fatal contradictions only when it was too late. In fact, a central assertion of *Denying and Disclosing God* is that it was not an antagonistic interaction between the post-Aristotelian sciences and traditional religion that begat modern atheism. Quite the opposite: it was the overly-welcoming resignation of theology to science, a squandering of theology's rich and abundant birthright, that gave rise to what we know as modern atheism. The victims, in this case, were the perpetrators.

Buckley first sets out to schematize three settlements reached by religion and science in the early years of modernity, identifying them with the persons of Galileo Galilei, in his work on motion, Johannes Kepler, in his philosophy of geometry, and Isaac Newton, in his study of mechanics. The three settlements were different, but successful in their own ways, and each scientist saw his work as contributing to humanity's witnessing to the divine. For Galileo, the disciplines of religion and science were autonomous in their own spheres; while the issue of physical causes was his concern as a scientist, the question of a "first cause" was not part of the same kind of study, a stance akin to Stephen Jay Gould's view of religion and science as "non-overlapping magisteria." Buckley calls this the "separation" model of religion and science.

Kepler's Platonism contributed to his view that all study is a path to the single source of truth. This truth spoke many different languages, of which geometry was one, scripture another, and so on. Knowledge of any of them is knowledge, however partial, of God. Buckley calls this the "subsumption" model: incorporating the two disciplines under the more general principle of truth.

It was the Newtonian settlement, however, that carried the day. Newton held that mechanics is exhaustive and universal, that it is in theory capable of explaining everything, including other branches of science and mathematics (including Galileo's motion and Kepler's geometry), and even religious belief: Newton considered his work to be a warrant for a "fundamental religion," grounded in universal mechanics. This is the "foundation" model of religion and science, where science is the underlying principle, the source of meaning, and religious belief and practice is built on top of it – if it is built at all. It is from this Newtonian view of mechanics that science more generally came to stake its claim of universal competence. In laying out this schema, Buckley does a great service to readers interested in the history of science generally, and those studying religion and science specifically. The typology he presents clarifies the relationships that the three individual disciplines had with theology, and then explains how those relationships each contributed separately to the debate about religion. Against a popular perception that a monolithic science took on a monolithic religion, Buckley provides details and context that illuminate both the historical and contemporary situations.

Of course, it wasn't the scientific developments themselves that led to modern atheism, but the particular worldviews that became associated with them; "events become ideas," Buckley

writes, and the idea of scientific foundationalism that came from the Newtonian settlement, after being quickly embraced by 17<sup>th</sup> century apologists, ironically led to their eventual defeat, hoisted with their own petard. By running into the arms of scientific naturalism, and accepting its standards as the only suitable criteria for the generation of meaning, religion first lost its independent standing, and then any standing at all.

Buckley gives three examples of how that happened, how apologetic instincts, which saw inferences from science as a sure route to Christian belief, contained inherent contradictions that would lead to their own demise. He uses as his examples Leonard Lessius, in Flanders in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the warring factions of scholastics and Cartesians in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Cotton Mather, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. This diverse group held in common a strategy of what Buckley calls a “bracketing of the religious,” the setting-aside of what belonged uniquely to religion – its history, institutions, piety, experiences, and so forth – in favor of an apologetic based on inferences from the natural world. Buckley makes clear that, in a moment of theological stridency and seeming triumph, this was an implicit admission of defeat. Why? Because the apologists across the board were “confessing to the cognitive insufficiency, even emptiness, of religious beliefs and experience (46).” They had decided to locate the warrants for belief exclusively in the design of the natural world, inferring the existence of God from the number of planets, the structures of an organism, or the mechanical nature of causation. With an increasing scientific sophistication, however, and a philosophical shift to an understanding of matter as inherently dynamic (thus not requiring a “Prime Mover”), God became not so much impossible as unnecessary. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Buckley writes, “Mechanics may not have needed theology, but theology in its apologetics had come to need mechanics (36).”

This is the core hypothesis of the book: atheism came about from the conscious abandonment, by religious people, of millennia of religious thought, culture, and practice, in favor of jumping on the promising bandwagon of biology and astronomy: “The infinite mystery that was God had in effect become a corollary of a particular configuration of the solar system or of the human body (36).” “Natural theology” had become merely an appendage of physics, and one that could easily be lopped off when it became troublesome. By adopting inference from design, Lessius, Mather, and others disqualified from consideration exactly that lived experience that gives religion its richness. In the story of the birth of atheism in the modern world, the well-meaning natural theologians are implicated just as much as Diderot and d’Holbach.

Buckley takes a sharp detour in the third chapter to make sure that we don’t include Aquinas in that list of atheism’s progenitors. The preface reveals that this was a conclusion some reviewers had reached from Buckley’s previous book, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. Understood as part of a larger conversation between the previous text, commentary on it, and the present text, the interpolation on Aquinas makes sense; Buckley is setting out to refine and clarify his overarching theme about the genesis of atheism. Read in the isolation of *Denying and Disclosing God*, however, it feels like a passionate defense in response to an accusation that no one has made.

Briefly, Buckley takes as his starting point an article by Paul Tillich in which Tillich essentially accuses Aquinas of the same thing of which Buckley is accusing the natural theologians: privileging rationality and the study of the world of the senses over an understanding of God as the presupposition of all that is. As Tillich explained it, “God can never be reached if he is the *object* of a question, and not its *basis*,” and Tillich recognized the predecessor to natural theology’s arguments from inference in Aquinas’ opening questions in the *Summa theologiae* about whether God exists. Buckley then demonstrates, with great erudition and an exhaustive knowledge of Aquinas’ thought, how Aquinas isn’t inferential after all. Rather, Aquinas creates a third way between inferential rationality (of the kind Tillich despises) and beatific vision. This third way of “proving” God is to recognize that the human desire for happiness, broadly defined, is in fact a longing for God, as God is the proper end of all desire. Since one only desires what one knows, however vaguely, God’s presence is the

foundation of all human desire, not only its object, and thus the foundation of all human life. With Buckley having established that the presence of God is assumed, not inferred, in the *Summa*, Aquinas is off the hook. It is a fine defense of the theologian, and an illuminating look at Aquinas' Christology. Nonetheless, in tone and narrative flow, it impedes the progress of the argument.

It is a rare diversion in a book that otherwise proceeds with great skill and clarity, and the insights into philosophical and theological history that it provides far outweigh this chapter-long digression. Buckley succeeds in bringing to life the personalities and ideas of early modernity through brief character studies and accounts of philosophical controversies. By the end of the story of western atheism that he so masterfully tells, it's hard not to feel sorry for those earnest natural theologians, who thought they had discovered the Holy Grail of evidence in the motion of the stars and the mechanics of the universe; finally, they were able to offer conclusive, scientific proof of the ancient faith. Their intentions were good and their piety sincere, but Buckley shows that, ironically, they, not the scientists, are the parents of today's atheist Europeans. Alas, the Holy Grail turned out to be laced with poison, and by the time they realized it, the natural theologians had drunk too deeply.

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